Notes from Chelouranya

The Philosophy of Dress

Insights often come in a flash. What I mean by that is that a very important idea may often be conveyed to one in an instant, as a sudden vision or apprehension of the true nature of things. I suspect that happens to all of us. The difficult part is following up that insight: grasping it between one's teeth and methodically shaking out the meaning of it. This activity is what is called philosophy. At least it is the feminine and spiritual approach to philosophy: taking the insights or intuitions that are granted to us and diligently teasing out their full meaning.

Such an insight came to me yesterday. There has always been a lot of philosophical work and discussion in Chelouranya on the subject of dress and its real meaning: on why bongos dress as they do, what it signifies about their culture, and how it helps to create the spiritual and psychological conditions that are the Pit. Yesterday I accompanied my friend to the post office and I was watching a group of bongos shuffling about in their jeans, soft, floppy clothes, and bits of tracksuit, and suddenly an insight came to me. At first it seemed like a very strange one.

"These people are naked!" I suddenly realized. It seemed like an odd thought, because obviously they were wearing clothes. Admittedly that is giving the word "clothes" an exceptionally broad definition, but they were undeniably wearing *something*. Now of course this insight was not unaware of that. It was saying "These are not *clothed* people. They are naked bodies with some rags thrown over them. They are *essentially* naked. And they are not naked like a classical nude in a painting. They are naked in the way that cats and dogs and monkeys are naked."

I knew what I was seeing was true, but it was hard to make rational sense of it. After all, to say a clothed

person is a naked person with clothes on is surely a tautology. Cannot one say that of *any* clothed person from the 1930s or from ancient Greece? No, this insight was saying. Not in the same way. Those people were authentically dressed as these people in front of me were not. They were just naked bodies with odd bits of cloth thrown over them. The comparison that had been in my mind when I first saw them was a reference in a Quirinelle book to "the hour at which ladies like to dress for cocktails". Such ladies *dressed*; these people did not dress. They just put things onto what they still regarded as mere bodies in the animal sense: essentially naked.

Why was that the case? I asked myself. Was it something to do with their loose and casual attitudes to what they call "sex"? Or was that too simple an answer?

I tried to explain the answer to a brunette friend, partly because having to explain an idea often forces it to be clarified. We started to analyze it. What was the fundamental difference between *dressed* people—whether in the 1950s at the cocktail hour, or at any other hour, or in the eighteenth century, or in Mandarin China, or in a tribal society—from these "naked apes" with clothes on?

Suddenly it began to make sense. By going back to more ancient societies we were taking the thing back to its roots. We were applying the principles of Essentialist thought. If one looks at the earlier societies, it is clear that dress is a *ritual* thing. In tribes, adornment may represent what are called "totem animals" (actually the animal embodiments of Janyati or Archetypes), they also represent status within the order of the tribe, which is conceived as a microcosm of the order of the cosmos. The tasselled fringes worn by some Red Indian tribes represent the sun's rays, with all the metaphysical significance of solarity. Dress in old China was carefully regulated by ritual considerations and those of social function, which—as everywhere else, including the mediaeval West—was seen not only as reflecting, but as being organically related to the functioning of the cosmos itself.

By the time we get to the Renaissance West, these ritual considerations are waning. We are moving from a Sattwic to a Rajasic society. But as is the case in every aspect of Rajasic society, it continues to reflect, in its outward-directed forms, the upward-directed prototypes of its Sattwic roots. They are increasingly unaware of the spiritual and metaphysical significance of their dress—which is now vestigial—but the thread is still not broken. Even in the 1950s, on the very verge of the Eclipse, women dress for cocktails, men go to business carefully attired with bowler hats and furled umbrellas. Postmen, policemen, cinema usherettes, and dozens of other functionaries (and I use this term in the positive and vestigially-Sattwic sense of "performers of functions within the Great Order") are meticulously uniformed. Evening dress is worn for theater, opera, and dining at good restaurants and hotels, but even at the local cinema and *palais de dance* (vulgarly termed "the pally") people are conscious of "going out" and dress accordingly.

What we are saying is that all these people are *dressed* in the same sense that a tribal dancer, a Chinese mandarin, or a mediaeval courtier is dressed. The thread is diminished but as yet unbroken. With the eclipse and the onset of a Tamasic society, the thread, in dress as in most other things, is broken. People are no longer dressed in the true sense of the word. In a Sattwic society, as Dr Coomaraswamy often said, "body

and soul are served together". The objects of craft, whether a drinking-bowl or a chariot, have both functional and metaphysical significance. In a Rajasic society, the ritual (or intellectual) significance of the products of human art and craft is increasingly forgotten; but there is still a sense of *rightness* that links them back to their Sattwic origins. And of all artifacts, clothes are the closest to us—both literally and figuratively.

If we look at the typical bongo clothes they are, in their own words, designed to be "casual" and to reject the element of *form* (that is why they are called *informal*). In theory their design is for comfort and convenience and many bongos do choose their dress for those reasons (or at least imagine that they do). In this respect, bongo clothes are precisely "animal" in nature because they are designed to perform the same functions as a non-human creature's fur or feathers—simply to keep her warm and be as convenient as possible in all ways.

Now as soon as one says this, it is clear that even the term "animal" requires some qualification. The function of bongo clothes does not correspond to the *real* function of animal skin. It corresponds to the notion of animal skin held by the post-Darwinian mind. The notion that animals are simply "functional units designed* for survival" and that the best functional units are the ones that survive. This is not what tradition teaches us about animals. From tradition we learn what every traditional people knows: that animals embody particular *qualities*. Thus their fur or feathers, like human artifacts, have both a functional and a symbolic aspect. So when we said at the beginning that bongo dress resembles the nakedness of dogs, cats, or monkeys, we were, in fact taking an unfairly low view of dogs, cats, and monkeys. They are in fact more *dressed* in the true meaning of the term, than the bongo wearing what are termed Pit-pyjamas. Their fur is not merely functional. It is part of the expression of the fundamental reality that lies behind dog-ness or cat-ness, while the Eclipse has precisely revolted against the expression of fundamental realities through outward appearance.

This is yet another illustration of the dictum that maid, as the Axial creature of this world, has the power to rise above the earthly state, *or to fall below it*. Sattwic humanity seeks to express realities that transcend the worldly plane. Animals cannot do this. Rajasic humanity reflects the earthly plane in all its beauty and variety, and, of course the earthly plane is the reflection of the heavenly. This is what animals also do, on a very different level. Tamasic humanity turns away from the earthly plane in the *downward* direction. Animals cannot do this either. They cannot desert their *thamë,* their natural worldly function, either by transcending it or by falling below it. In this respect, Tamasic humanity is below the animal level.

So how does Tamasic humanity fall below the animal level in its dress? In the first place by adopting a dress that is (in theory at least) solely functional and stripped of all symbolic depth; no animal can do this. Secondly, bongo dress often finds ways to fall below even this level: jeans are bought deliberately faded and torn, for example, expressing the desire not for simple functionality but for chaos and dissolution. Clothes are worn with jokes or commercial slogans spelled out across their fronts, not merely serving the functions of comfort and warmth, but also insulting the dignity of the wearer and turning her into something trivial and foolish. Clothes are often unnecessarily baggy and floppy, to a point where they must surely become cumbersome and inconvenient. In the quest for *symbolic* looseness and degeneration, the *actual* function of "comfort and convenience" is left behind. I am sure the reader can supply many examples of her own, some

of which we may be unaware of.

So is it true to say that nobody in the Pit is dressed? No. Businessmen, for example, are still dressed to express their function in a manner that is vestigially Rajasic. But note that this is under attack with "dressing down days", "informal offices", etc. The Pit has an inbuilt instinct to attack everything that is vestigially Rajasic, and we can expect to see the business suit coming under increasing attack**. It is common for bongos to refer to business people disparagingly as "suits".

The use of the term "suits" is deeply significant. The implication is that the person wearing a suit has simply *become* the suit. He is no longer a person, just a "suit". What is the reason for this perception? It is rooted in the Pit's hatred of Archetypes and of the concept of conforming to what it calls a "stereotype". It fears that in adopting the dress suitable to a function, the individual will be somehow swallowed up by the function and cease to exist. It has often been pointed out that the bongo in her loose, floppy clothes or her jeans and T-shirt is just as conformist as the most rigidly-uniformed functionary. Her style of dress is dictated from outside and is necessary for social acceptance within particular bongo groups. The illusory "individualism" she has been taught to value is as stereotyped and mass-produced as any other form of conformity. When bongos dress differently from other bongos it is almost always in conformity with some particular group or sub-set within the Pit, often associated with some form of commercially-produced music.

Some might, therefore, be tempted to say that bongo "casual" dress is the exact equivalent of uniforms, suits, or real-world fashions—both being the prescribed dress of a particular group or culture. However, this is not actually the case. While both are equally prescribed, one is the dress of form, and the other is the dress of anti-form: and while anti-form is just as much a conformity as form, it does not thereby become a form. The "informal" or a-formal bongo is very consciously not "dressed" in the sense that a person from the real world is dressed. She often fears dress as something that might rob her of the looseness she mistakes for "freedom". Being dressed is a form of mask, and any mask might take away one's "real self".

The problem is that this "real self" is illusory, as one can see by looking at any group of bongo type-3s. How different are they from each other in their attitudes, manners, beliefs, or behavior? Among smartly dressed real people one finds far more variety of personality, far more distinctness. By rejecting form, one becomes a rootless, unfixed creature that can be blown about by every passing wind of propaganda, every new slogan or catch-phrase, every new fad or pseudo-morality. One becomes the perfect, rootless, manipulable proletarian.

NOTES

* Even the word "designed" is only used figuratively, since the theory asks us to believe that there is no intelligent "design" and that a dog evolved from a protozoon by a series of survival-related "accidents". Actually, many biologists now deny this rather extraordinary notion; but we are concerned here with the popular view of animals as derived from what the average person imagines evolutionism to be saying: for it is this that has shaped the current belief as to what an animal is.

** It is possible however, that even some elements in the Pit are aware that a degree of Rajasic culture and formality needs to be retained if bongo administration is to remain functional, which may account for the almost anachronistic survival of the business suit to the present time. Curiously, what is being recognized here is that the “functionalist” view of dress leads, in practice, to dysfunctional behavior.

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